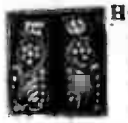
The Builder.

No. CCCCI.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1850.



THOSE who alarm may be expected to re-assure, when the danger is over. In our paper of the 28th ult. we inserted four-and-twenty lines from a correspondent, directing attention to the fact, that instead of continued iron palisades in front of the new British Museum, as originally intended, a high stone wall was to be erected at each end of the enclosure in Great Russell-street, extending some yards beyond the residences which are unluckily tacked on to the structure. Our contemporaries of the daily press reprinted and commented on the letter; our powerful and ready ally, *The Times*, in particular, brought its broadside to bear on the proposed change; and the result, we are glad now to be able to state, is, that the walls are given up, and that the original plan will be reverted to. We need scarcely say that we heartily congratulate the public and the trustees on the determination of this question. The wall would have been a great eyesore, especially at the Montague-street corner, and would have blocked up the place most unnecessarily and injuriously.

The public, or rather their representatives, should take warning from this occurrence, and insist, with regard to public buildings and works, in which their honour, convenience, and instruction are concerned, and for which they find the money, on knowing exactly what is going to be done before the works are commenced. Had this been done in the case of the Museum itself, that building, stately and noble as it will be when completed, would have been very different in character and arrangement,—much more convenient and spacious, and much less costly, as compared with commodiousness and extent. The public have a *right* to be informed on such matters. The haughty reserve and mystification of officials is most improper and injurious, and ought not to be permitted: they should be quietly informed, and made to understand it too, that they are the servants of the public, the dispensers of the public money, the guardians of the public honour, and, not merely have no right to pooh-pooh and disregard those who have placed them in that position, *but shall not be allowed to do so.* The sooner this understanding is arrived at the better for all parties. What the duty and policy of the public, on their side, is, in respect of national works, we told them not long ago.

But we would return to the subject that led to this observation, in order to remove a misconception which prevails. Our correspondent, in the letter referred to, ascribed the proposal to erect the walls to an objection on the part of the gentlemen residing in the wings, to the publicity which an iron railing would give to their dwellings, and the officers of the Museum have, in consequence, been much abused by writers in the daily papers. Now that one or two of the officers of that establishment would treat with very little attention the opinion of the public, as compared with their own comfort, and have a very wrong notion of their position, we are not disposed to deny. An officer who, putting his hands into his pockets and bridling up, could say, as one did say, to a very respectable foreign architect who, armed with the name of another of the officers of different mould, had found his way into the Gallery of Antiquities one Saturday,—"Sir, we will not allow *any one* to run about our house on a Saturday,"—will be none the worse for some gentle reminders of his real position, and a hint which may regulate his future bearing. But in the present case, we learn that the officers of the Museum had nothing whatever to do with the proposition; and it is not fair, therefore, that they should bear the blame.

The proposition emanated solely from the architect, Mr. Sidney Smirke, and was prompted partly by desire to get over what he considered a difficulty in the shape of the front ground at the west end (next the houses in Great Russell-street), and to mask what is certainly a very ugly part of the building. He was also regulated by the stipulated position of four pedestals in the line of the enclosure, which are to receive statues. It was simply a question of judgment; and the trustees yielded to views, which both the architect and they have now withdrawn on reconsideration.

The statues to be set up will be of Newton, Shakspeare, Milton, and Bacon: models have already been made for them by Sir Richard Westmacott, who, it seems, whether justly or not, considering how few opportunities the sculptor has in England, is to execute them all. The pedestals are in hand.

A portion of the sculpture for the tympanum of the pediment is now on the premises. This is also by Sir Richard Westmacott, and represents the progress of man from a time when, wild in woods, the native savage ran, up to the highest state of intellectual advancement. The part already there is executed in a broad, bold style, in Portland stone, and promises to be effective in its place. This sculpture, the antefixæ, and the intended groups at foot of the central portico, may be expected to give what the edifice at present very much wants externally,—life and movement.

A WORD ON THE TREATMENT OF THE WINDOW IN ANGLO-CLASSIC DESIGN.*

The office or function of the window is not a more important one in the pointed style than it is in the classic: it has as strong a claim to consideration and character in the one as in the other, and therefore no good and sufficient reason can be assigned why, while the jambs of the Gothic window enshrine a labyrinth of beauty and intricacy of decoration, the filling up of the classic window should be entirely neglected in the way of design. I say neglected, but it seems worse than neglected: not only have imagination, taste, artistic feeling, had no part in the design, but it is positively marred by the sash in common use. The straight sash bars, dividing it into a series of equal squares, do not improve the appearance of the humblest cottage, but in an architectural composition they are an injury: sash bars appear as decided lines, more harsh and cutting than the design elsewhere exhibits. Around, the lines are the boundaries of superficies, but here they harshly cut up and separate. In short, in most instances a spectator, ignorant of the custom, would be led to conclude that the architect had abandoned this portion of the façade to the joiner, who had filled it up in the cheapest manner he could. In Gothic art the window tracery is one of the most important features: it was made either a part of the system of the wall tracery even of the richest interiors, or it became the prime object, and sometimes the sole object, of decoration, which was concentrated upon it. What, therefore, would be the appearance of the great cathedrals and other buildings, either from within or without, if their windows, with their storied panes, their stained glass, their perforated heads, were taken out?

This is, indeed, a strange anomaly in our Anglo-classic pile: the resources of decoration have been lavished on the frame, not on the picture. The architect has elsewhere, perhaps, seized every opportunity to exhibit luxuriance of imagination, purity of taste, and refinement of feeling; but within the jambs of the window neither mind nor feeling have entered. Straight parallel lines are oft-times deemed too rude in the slating of a lodge. We must have fancy slating, geometrical graces of form, in our roofs, while the most important feature of the front is slighted.

But the window has to do with more than the exterior decoration: it is seen on both sides: it is a feature of the interior as well as of the exterior,—the link connecting them,—the part from which Imagination weaves her web of conjecture regarding the interior. If any sacrifice, therefore, be made to beauty, it should be here; and to the window should be given a tone corresponding to the supposed elegance and refinement within. I know that the spirit and character of the classic architecture must be borne in mind, but design might be introduced into a classic window without doing violence to either. Its appearance from within is as little to be disregarded as its aspect from without. What avails the elaborate floorcloth and ceiling of the drawing-room, the pictorial embellishment of the walls, panelled and gilded decorations, while the window is plainness—nay, ugliness—itself?

I have above contrasted our common sliding sash with pointed windows only; but not only ecclesiastical architecture, but the domestic Tudor, Elizabethan, and other styles, on this point reprove us. The bays and oriels, mullions and casements, of our old mansions are in harmony with the rest of the design. Compare our present windows with those of Venice, with those of the old Venetian houses of the chief cities of the Ionian Isles, and the palaced streets of Valetta! The lower windows of our ancient street architecture were many of them gems of artistic taste! Many beautiful specimens yet remaining of the old timber buildings, erected centuries ago, show what careful objects of design were the windows: divided by mullions into elegantly proportioned lights, with fanciful heads, they are invariably the most agreeable objects in the design, and might make us blush for our present practice—a practice than which anything more unarchitectural or ungeometrical it would be difficult to imagine. No division could be less artistic than these sashes. There is nothing more barbarous in any Romanesque style, however infantine; and nothing but æsthetic blindness, added to exaggerated notions of their utility, could have procured their toleration.

I admit that they possess some advantages: they may be made completely weather-proof, and do not soon get out of order. But their unsightliness is too great; and for architect of genuine feeling for the beautiful, if left to himself, would, even in a private dwelling, make use of them. With the vertically sliding arrangement I necessarily associate the ordinary division into equal squares; for the unsightly overhanging of the upper sheet, and the exposure of cord and pulleys, render the window unworthy the expense of any geometrical or fanciful division of each sash.

But there is no real difficulty in a reformation on this head. We are not indissolubly wedded to the practice. Excellent substitutes might be devised. French casement sashes in buildings of a domestic character are as tasteful as the others are tasteless: they are eminently harmonious with classic architecture, and are a good receptacle for plate-glass. In general, I know they are not made water-tight in England, and this circumstance is used as a ground of objection to them; but they *can* be made perfectly impervious to the weather, and have been so made in England as well as in France. I know of no serious objection to this plan. No matter what the size or proportion of the window opening, it can be so divided, both ways, by mullions and transoms, as to have the casements of a proper size, or sufficiently small to open without inconvenience; whereas in sliding windows, if short, the sheets run badly, and get out of order. Besides this,

* See p. 471, *ante*.

To learn about OCR and PDF Compression go to ThePaperlessOffice.org